



Russia's Attack on Ukraine Is Criminal and Wrong: The War Still Isn't America's Fight

By Doug Bandow

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War brings out the worst in human beings. It wreaks death and destruction on a mass scale. It also highlights similar levels of political hypocrisy.

Such as those piously pushing their governments to intervene to support Ukraine, after ignoring far more deadly conflicts, such as in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, which killed millions and displaced millions more. Or, even worse, those actively supporting foreign states currently engaged in even more destructive and murderous aggression, such as Saudi Arabia in Yemen, in which hundreds of thousands have died and the civilian population faces mass malnutrition and disease. U.S. outrage at unprovoked foreign aggression tends to be ever so selective.

Russia's war on Ukraine has raised the perennial question of humanitarian intervention. Countries under attack typically seek white knights. So Ukrainians understandably would like the West, which in reality means America, to save them.

Last week President Volodymyr Zelensky allowed: "Who is ready to fight with us? I do not see anyone. Who is ready to give Ukraine a guarantee of NATO membership? Everyone is afraid." He acknowledged reality, telling his people that "The fate of Ukraine depends only on Ukrainians." Alas, he added, "the most powerful country in the world looked on from a distance."

Which is precisely what the U.S. government should do.

Of course, it seems harsh, unseemly, even cowardly to some for America to stand by. However, the world is filled with injustice and Washington has neither the means nor competence to eradicate evil from the world. Equally important, doing so isn't the U.S. government's job. Rather, protecting Americans, including those who serve in its military, is Washington's chief responsibility.

Despite the terrible events in Ukraine and calls to intervene, this war is not America's to fight.

- Washington has no treaty or other legal obligation to defend Ukraine, which is not part of and was not slated to become part of NATO, despite a cavalcade of duplicitous assurances made to Kyiv over the years. Some advocates point to the Budapest Memorandum, which accompanied Ukraine's relinquishment of nuclear weapons in 1994. However, rarely is that agreement's language cited. Shmuel Klatzkin of the Rohr Jewish Learning Institute simply referred to "the lawful word of the Western democracies that they would guarantee its peace and safety." Mark Thiessen of the George W. Bush administration, conveniently left out the operative clause when he wrote that Washington agreed "to provide assistance to Ukraine...if Ukraine should become a victim of an act of aggression." However, the provision provides that the parties "commit to seek immediate [United Nations] Security Council action to provide assistance to Ukraine," which in practice is to promise nothing. Which Kyiv agreed to because it knew it could get no more.
- Ukraine is not important for U.S. security, let alone vital, which should be the standard for involvement in any war, and especially one against a nuclear power. Throughout most of America's existence, Kyiv was part of either the Russian Empire or Soviet Union. Geographically Ukraine is about as distant from the U.S. as possible. As dramatically illustrated by current hostilities, adding Ukraine to NATO would have reduced U.S. security by bringing conflict into the alliance. Worse, any resulting fight would be with a nuclear power, which in practice would be America's fight, as most of its allies ran in the other direction.
- Russia's nuclear arsenal makes any confrontation far more dangerous than any of the other many wars America has fought, including World War II. During the Cold War, the U.S. and Soviet Union had dangerous moments – most obviously the Cuban missile crisis and 1983 Able Archer military exercise. However, never have two large-scale nuclear powers fought a war in which pressure will be unremitting on both sides to escalate. That danger would be especially acute on Moscow's side since Russia's conventional forces remain more limited, creating an increased incentive to rely on tactical nuclear weapons. Even if both sides recognize the risk of nuclear war, in the heat of combat practical exigencies might take over. Nothing in the current conflict is worth such a risk.
- Apocalyptic claims that Russian conquest of Ukraine might unleash Putin's inner-Hitler are not serious. For instance, *National Review's* Kevin Williamson warned that Putin "won't stop at Ukraine unless we stop him there." Onetime DOD official Evelyn N. Farkas added a double dose of hysteria: "Left unrestrained, Putin will move swiftly, grab some land, consolidate his gains, and set his sights on the next satellite state in his long game to restore all the pre-1991 borders: the sphere of geographical influence he deems was unjustly stripped from Great Russia." Yet Putin's near monomaniacal focus has been Kyiv. After 22 years Putin had done nothing to recreate the USSR, which looks more like a wish list than a to-do list. He seized only Crimea, which was related to the dispute with Ukraine, and stoked separatism in the Donbass, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia, which worked to bar Kyiv and Tbilisi from NATO. Moreover, the high cost of attempting to swallow Ukraine's nearly 40 million people and large territory will discourage any further adventurism.
- Fear that the conflict might not stay within Ukraine's boundaries is no argument for joining the war. Certainly, the invasion's impact will be felt by Ukraine's neighbors – most dramatically due to refugees as well as the errant detritus of combat. Danger of

inadvertent contact will increase with any military support offered by the West, including weapons shipments and training. However, that highlights the need for greater caution, not action. If there is no justification for intervening in a war by choice, then it is especially important to guard against being dragged in by inadvertence.

- The strongest impulse to intervene is humanitarian. Like other conflicts, this one is a monstrous injustice. It is difficult to watch the consequences of war without acting to stop it. Yet, as noted earlier, this outrage is highly biased toward causes favored for other reasons. Although the fact that America cannot do everything doesn't mean it shouldn't do anything, some objective criteria are necessary for doing so. However, none exist for humanitarian intervention. And proposed standards have been ridiculous in practice no matter how serious in theory. For instance, one proposal was "that military intervention should be considered whenever the rate of killing in a country or region greatly exceeds the U.S. murder rate." This would effectively disconnect foreign policy from reality on the ground and put it in the hands of America's mayors and their ability fight crime. That is obviously ludicrous. However, what would be a better standard?
- Ultimately, Washington has no warrant to launch foreign crusades, no matter how good its intentions. To be true to its very purpose and design, what remains a limited constitutional government of a democratic republic should focus on protecting the American political community. The lives of people elsewhere are no less valuable. But the responsibility of the U.S. government is to those who created it, live under it, sustain it, support it, pay for it, staff it, and die for it. Policymakers are constantly tempted to break that principle by intervening in one or another conflict elsewhere. However, the multiple disastrous wars of the last two decades offer a painful dose of reality. Speaking almost two centuries ago Secretary of State John Quincy Adams warned that by intervening abroad, America "might become the dictatress of the world. She would be no longer the ruler of her own spirit."

Russia has done a great wrong against Ukraine and the Ukrainian people. And the American people personally need not remain "impartial in thought as well as in action," as President Woodrow Wilson once demanded. Even now many are organizing to aid Kyiv's cause.

However, Washington must stay out of the conflict. As painful as it might be to some, America's role really is to look "on from a distance." In that way it best serves those to whom it is responsible, the American people.

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